

The History of Hair Styles

When I was young I had brown hair and a red beard. It grew that way without any need for dye. It was simply natural genetics. The beard started out as a bit of blond fluff on the chin and developed into full Celtic/Viking genetic ginger in contrast to the brown hair on the top of my head. Now it's mostly grey but it doesn't turn grey in any sort of regular or uniform way.

Genetics are weird and freakish. My dad went bald. By contrast, my hair receded about half an inch or so and then stopped but the hair on the crown of the head is thin enough to see the scalp through.

When I was 16 I was growing my hair long and I went to see the hippy rock musical "Hair" at the Shaftesbury Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London. I also had the album of all the songs from the Broadway cast.

The title song makes it clear that hair was a big deal in those days.

Long hair for men was being presented as if it was a new fashion that somebody had just invented but it wasn't, of course.

The generation which was shipped off to fight in World War One in 1914 had their hair cut short and the ones who came back alive became the role models for "Modern" men. Short hair was the new "Modern" look.

Men had been accustomed to long hair since the stone age and men with very short hair were the exception to the rule. Even soldiers often had long hair or facial hair and sailors generally wore pigtails.....until World War One.

After the war men with short hair were in fashion and long hair began to be associated with conscientious objectors. Women mostly still had longer hair although the "bobbed" style began to catch on. By the outbreak of the Second World War a man with long hair might be thought a homosexual or, at least, effeminate.

It was a strange transition from all of the centuries of men with long hair. Religious groups could claim exemption from the new style and reference could be made to Samson and Delilah.

Even Robert E. Howard's Conan the Barbarian could sometimes be depicted by illustrators as having the new "Modern" short hair.

In the 1960s we were taught at school about the legendary short hair of Oliver Cromwell's Roundheads which called itself the "New Model Army". Schoolteachers used the contrast between the short haired Roundheads and the long haired Cavaliers as a visual aid to teaching history.

The Beatles and the Rolling Stones became fashionable icons and their long hair was presented to us as if it were a new idea. Comedians on television made feeble jokes about long haired teenagers. "A trend setter? He looks more like an Irish Setter!"

The Modernistic Jazz generation may have used the expression "Long Hair" to refer to classical musicians but things were changing back to the old ways. Old was becoming new.

William Hartnell's appearance in Doctor Who showed us what someone from the past or future might look like, with his beyond Teddy Boy, Albert Einstein locks and Marvel Comics reminded us all that the Viking God Thor's hair was not from our modern world.

But there was a social revolution going on.

In the 1960s women were gradually, grudgingly, permitted to wear trousers to the office. During the same time men began to be gradually, grudgingly permitted to grow long hair without being ostracised.

When I was living in a hippy squat near Glastonbury in 1973 a girl with a shaven head stayed with us for a while. She explained that she had shaved off her hair because she felt that she was "hiding behind it" and that the hair was giving her an excuse to be extremely introvert and shy. She wanted to increase her own confidence and so she denied herself the hair to hide behind.

I wondered whether I was hiding behind my long hair and I tried to decide whether to cut my hair short as an experiment. It was a difficult decision to make. Long hair was a symbol of reclaiming our true male image from the post-WW1 brainwashing of Western society.

Stephen Stills had released a song called "Almost Cut My Hair" about the issues surrounding the long hair image. Letting his "Freak Flag" fly. "Freak" was the new name for post-hippy. The following year I was thinking about maybe joining the Hare Krishna devotees and that would have meant getting a partly shaven head. Then I was introduced to Orman and the Emin Society and told to get a short haircut. I could have said "No" but I went ahead and got the haircut since it was something I'd been thinking about anyway.

I continued to have regular haircuts from early 1974 through to mid 1975 when Leo, Raymond Armin, the leader of the Emin said that the reason he had his head shaved bald was because it affected the kind of "Force" he was getting. He meant the "cosmic" or "healing" force and I immediately went home and shaved my head bald too. From then onwards people treated me like a skinhead.

I had a bald head and people saw that and made their own assumptions. People at work treated me like a skinhead. Even Emin people treated me like a skinhead. Even Leo himself spoke to me as if he was speaking to a skinhead. In spite of the fact that he himself had a shaven head and that I was obviously copying him he still asked me whether I wanted to "fight" him. I mean, he wasn't suggesting that we should have a fight. He was seriously asking me whether I was a fighting sort of person just because of the shaven head. The "Modernistic" style of cropped hair had that much of a violent image associated with it.

That was 1975.

People told me that it would be “spikey” when it grew out but I doubt they anticipated the change in fortunes which would be experienced by professional barbers when punk arrived. Interestingly it seems that “Barbarian” and “Barber” which sound as though they must be from the same linguistic roots are supposed by etymologists to come from entirely separate origins. “Barbarian” supposedly coming from an old Greek word for outsiders who mumble or babble or do not speak Greek properly and “Barber” supposedly from an old word for “beard”.

Being an awkward and obstinate sort of person I choose to disregard both of these etymologies and make up my own origin for these two similar sounding words. I've decided, entirely unilaterally, that both words come from Old French “Barre” and Vulgar Latin “Barra”. Thus we have the modern words Bar, Barrier, Barb and Burr. Thinking in this way we can see that a “barbarian” is from outside the barrier and might be barred from the public bar. Similarly a “barber” might be a person who uses a sharpened bar or barb to cut the beard of the barbarian in order to make him look more civilised before being sent back to his home on the Barbary Shores.

Seriously though, perhaps the formation of these words is genuinely syncretic.

Society's attitudes to hair styles continue to change. Recently I went for an eye examination and was slightly surprised to see that the optician who was examining my eyes had a punk hair style. I guess that's becoming more normalised these days.

The World War One hair style continues to be mandatory in the British Army, Navy and Air Force and in many other armed forces around the world. This, of course, serves the purpose of uniformity. Wars and rumours of wars are society's main excuse for imposing restrictions and conformities upon the population.